

Carter, Robert Harris (1925–1999)

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For more than forty years Robert Harris Carter served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a colporteur, pastor, evangelist, missionary, and administrator. He has the distinction of being the first African American president of a North American Union Conference.

Robert was born on June 17, 1925, to William Carter (1884–1963) and Elizabeth Harris (1895–1966) in Bridgeport, Connecticut.¹ He attained his elementary education at the Shelton Public School in the Bridgeport. Robert completed grades 9 and 10 at Bridgeport's Congress School and Central High School, respectively.² His parents, both members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, convinced him to complete his secondary education at Oakwood Academy in Huntsville, Alabama.³

Upon graduating from the academy, Carter went on to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology in 1950 from Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama.⁴ While a college student, he worked for two and a half years as a literature evangelist in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference.⁵ As a consequence of his high academic achievements at Oakwood and commitment to the work of evangelism, he received a scholarship to continue his studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.⁶ In 1952 Carter earned a Master of Arts degree in religion from the seminary.⁷ On August 19, 1951, he married Rose Marie Vaughn at the Shiloh Seventh-day Adventist Church in Chicago, Illinois.⁸ The two had met as students at Oakwood College. They had one child, Kermit Leon Carter.⁹

In 1953, Carter became the assistant pastor of the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church in New York City, serving there for two years.¹⁰ He was then reassigned to the New Rochelle Seventh-day Adventist Church in New Rochelle, New York, where he pastored for five years.¹¹ The next four years were spent at the Rochester Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rochester, New York.¹² While pastoring the churches in New Rochelle and Rochester, Carter was the secretary-treasurer of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance in these cities.¹³ In 1962 he was recalled to the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church, where he served as the senior pastor for six years.¹⁴ There Carter oversaw the church's renovation project and established a newspaper, the *Ephesian*, which highlighted the events and concerns of Ephesus members.¹⁵ Moreover, as pastor, he served as the chairman of the R. T. Hudson School board, the Northeastern Conference Educational Committee, and the Ephesus church board. He served on the boards of the Bronx Community Hospital and the Harlem Community Center. Carter was a member and advocate of such civil rights organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League. In this capacity he presented a check on behalf of the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church for the Poor People's March on Washington, D.C., that took place in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁶ Altogether, he served the Northeastern Conference as a pastor-evangelist for 17 years.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 1957 the conference ordained Carter to the gospel ministry.¹⁸ In 1968 he became the secretary of the Northeastern Conference and served in that administrative capacity for four years.¹⁹

In 1972 Carter accepted an invitation from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to become the president of the Uganda Field in East Africa.²⁰ His appointment coincided with the commencement of political turmoil in the country resulting from the dictatorship of President Idi Amin. After approximately a year Carter's service in Uganda came to an abrupt halt when the government arrested and imprisoned him. Upon hearing of his arrest, Adventists went to the jail and commenced a prayer vigil. After two days his captors took him from the jail and forcibly



Robert Harris Carter
Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

put him on a plane bound for New York. Rose Carter, who participated in the vigil outside the Ugandan jail, joined her husband ten days later in the United States.²¹

Shortly after these harrowing events Carter accepted an invitation to pastor the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bermuda. Six months later the General Conference urged him to become the president of the Bermuda Mission, a position he held for more than three years.²² In 1977 Carter became secretary of the Lake Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, serving in that office for three years.²³ On May 7, 1980, delegates of the Lake Union Conference elected him president. Consequently, Carter became the first African American president of a North American Division union conference in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.²⁴ As president he served as the chief executive officer for 448 churches and 145 elementary and secondary schools in the states of Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Moreover, his position involved his serving as chair of the Lake Union Conference executive committee; the Hinsdale Health System and Hinsdale Hospital board of trustees; vice chair of the Andrews University board of trustees; and member of the Loma Linda, Oakwood College, Adventist Media Center, Adventist Living Centers, Christian Record Services, and Review and Herald Publishing Association boards of trustees. For 14 years he served as president of the Lake Union Conference.²⁵ He retired on July 31, 1994, and in October of that year, the Carters moved from Berrien Springs, Michigan, to Spring Hill, Florida.²⁶

In retirement Carter continued his work of ministry in the local church, serving as an elder, Sabbath School teacher, and religious liberty leader, and representing the church on the lay advisory committee. Carter died on September 21, 1999, at the age of 74, in Spring Hill, Florida.²⁷

Carter will be remembered as a diligent, talented, hardworking, compassionate, and highly effective decision-maker who devoted his life to winning souls for Christ. His legacy is established by the fact that he was the first African American to become the president of a union conference in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

SOURCES

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NOTES

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2. Robert Harris Carter, application to enter Oakwood Junior College, 1942, Oakwood University Archives.?
3. Jere Wallack, "The Heart of the Lake Union: A New Union President, Robert H. Carter," *Lake Union Herald* 72, no. 11 (May 1980): 3. See also "Robert Harris Carter obituary."?
4. "Robert H. Carter—Biography." See also Hennetta Jackson, "The R. H. Carters," *The Ephesian* 3, Oakwood University Archives.?
5. Jackson; Wallack, 3.?
6. "Robert H. Carter—Biography."?
7. Ibid. See also Jackson.?
8. Ibid.?
9. "Robert H. Carter—Biography." See also "Robert Harris Carter obituary"; "People: Robert H. Carter," Oakwood University Archives.?
10. Jackson. See also "Robert H. Carter—Biography."?

11. [Ibid.?](#)
12. [Ibid.?](#)
13. ["Robert H. Carter—Biography."?](#)
14. [Ibid. See Jackson.?](#)
15. [Ibid.?](#)
16. [Ibid.?](#)
17. ["Robert Harris Carter obituary."?](#)
18. [Wallack, 3.?](#)
19. [Ibid. See also "Robert Harris Carter obituary"; Jackson; "Robert H. Carter—Biography"; "In The News: First Black Union President Elected," *North American Regional Voice* 23, Oakwood University Archives.?](#)
20. ["R. H. Carter Accepts Mission Appointment," *Panorama* 2, no. 2 \(October 1972\): 1. See also "Robert H. Carter—Biography."?](#)
21. [Wallack, 3.?](#)
22. [Ibid. See also "Robert H. Carter—Biography"; "Robert Harris Carter obituary."?](#)
23. [Ibid.?](#)
24. [Ibid. See also "People: Robert H. Carter"; "In the News: First Black Union President Elected."?](#)
25. ["Robert H. Carter—Biography." See also "In the News: First Black Union President Elected"; "Robert Harris Carter obituary."?](#)
26. ["Robert Harris Carter obituary."?](#)
27. [Ibid.?](#)